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A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It’s really late at the moment, and I’m not close to getting this week’s issue out to the newsstands just yet. I was close to being on-time, but a couple of received phone calls took me out of my schedule!

But, although it’s been another one of those long and tiring weeks, the weather has been great - even though we did have a little rain. The temps have climbed off and on; and the snow in my yard is almost all gone. Just seeing a lawn, feeling a warm sun, and no more snow falling is a great feeling that helps get people out of the winter doldrums. And it’s doing just that for me, as well. Spring is close!

Yes, natural disasters and political unrest throughout the world have been dominating the news lately. There’s really nothing that I can add to the "discussion" that you haven’t heard already. The world is in a mess, one way or another. Hopefully things will start to stabilize and get back to some semblance of order!

A belated Happy St. Patrick’s Day to you all!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and again I do my damnedest to get a column ready. I’ve failed two weeks straight now, and that’s a record for me. This week, I’m bound and determined that I’m going to get a column in in time.

Of course, I had planned on cheating a bit. I was going to "touch up" the column I had planned on submitting two weeks ago.. then last week. But of course, the world had other plans, and my column about Charlie Sheen vs Mideast unrest in the media suddenly looks stupid when compared to what happened in Japan this past week.

Yeah, it’s going to be yet another ’piece’ about the earthquake and tsunami and nuclear reactor problems. Sorry.

Now, I WAS going to talk about the fact that even though there were a minimum of four ’’revolution’ struggles going on in the world right now, Charlie Sheen and his habits and lifestyle just dominated the news, washing away most of the news about Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Iran.

Ok, so the news feeding frenzy over Charlie’s slow, seemingly unavoidable meltdown (and I could very well be wrong about that) finally dies down and guess what?

Charlie goes and does something that the media figures we need to know... He takes "the show on the road".I don’t know much more about it than that, except that the tickets are selling like crazy. I have no idea if he’s doing comedy, tragedy, or both.

Now the big topic of conversation is whether Charlie is doing it for the money. I ve got news for you, folks..

OF COURSE HE’S DOING IT FOR THE MONEY!

I’m talking about the show, of course, not the addiction and the antic and such. The show, by the way, is entitled" My Violent Torpedo of Truth / Defeat is Not An Option.

I have no idea of whether any of the stories floating around about Charlie are actually true or not (but I’d be willing to bet that a lot of them are), but no matter what, he’s gotten his face in the news and anyone in the country who might not have known who Charlie Sheen was before this fiasco sure as heck knows it now. And you know the old adage: There is no such thing as bad publicity.

But enough about good old Charlie. There’s all the stuff going on in Libya right now, Egypt having taken a back seat to it, and Bahrain and Yemen and Lebanon barely worth a mention on the evening news. There’s not a lot more that I can say about Libya that you don’t already know. But its still a big problem... especially if you happen to live in one of the towns that the Libyan government is reducing to rubble. Has Gadhafi lost his grip? Certainly not his grip on the country... not by a long shot, not as long as the rebels remain unaided by U.N. sanctions? We’ll see. Historically, sanctions against countries like Libya have hurt only the general populace, not the people that need being dealt with; they’ve got all the money they need, got their palaces, servants, their military, etc., and generally find that their life hasn’t changed much except that their opposition is weaker from hunger.

But the big news this week... the really really big news is, in my mind, what the phrase ’triple threat’ was created for. Japan is still reeling from last week’s earthquake. A 9.0 that, if what I heard was accurate, was the fifth strongest earthquake ever recorded.

And, of course, within hours, someone on the internet got the bright idea to tie it to the upcoming’ supermoon’. That’s an interesting phenomenon in itself, but its not the cause of the quake. The Moon tonight (March 18) will, in fact be closer to the Earth than usual, but by less that two percent. And tying that to it happening to either full or new moon may sound important, but you’ve got to stop and think about what a new or full moon really is.

A full moon occurs when it is ’offset’ from the line drawn between the Sun and the Earth so that the side of the Moon that faces us is completely exposed to the Sun. A new Moon, on the other hand, is not when the earth blocks the Sun’s light from its face (that’s an eclipse), but when the side of the moon that is exposed to the sun is facing away from us at an angle so that the side we see (always the same side, since the moon is tidally locked with the Earth... its rotation period is exactly the same as its orbital period around the Earth) is dark. The distance of the Moon from the Earth during new or full moons is irrelevant. It could be anywhere between perigee (225,622 miles away) and apogee (252,088 miles away).Yeah, that’s a difference of more than 26,000 miles, and that sounds like a lot, but it’s an infinitesimal amount gravity-wise. And it’s not that its not a worthy idea... scientists have been thinking about this for a long long time, and they’ve looked at earthquake occurrences and closest-approach scenarios and haven’t found any correlation between perigee and earthquakes. So that, it would seem, answers that.

But let’s get back to Japan. An earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale wasn’t enough... there was a tsunami too. This big honkin’ wall of water that we’ve all seen in news video pretty much wiped out countless villages and even small cities, and the death toll is rising still. The number of people missing is mind boggling, and it will be a long time before most of the people looking for loved ones have an answer... and some never will.

And, of course, the thing that we’re all preoccupied with right at the moment is not Mother Nature’s fury and wrath, but the man-made threat. Yes, those nuclear reactors. I know that Japan needs the energy, but did anyone really think it was a great idea to put three (or was it four?) nuclear reactors together in the single most seismically active place in the entire world?

I’m all for using nuclear power, but there’s got to be a limit. First of all, I think we need to figure out what to do with all the ’spent’ nuclear fuel. Another thing is where and how to build them safely. There are lots of places I wouldn’t put a nuclear reactor. Iran is one of them. On the Japanese shoreline is another.

But GE designs and builds the darned things, and they told their customers that they were safe. And, within their particular parameters, I’m sure they were. They were built to withstand an earthquake measuring 7.0, if I remember correctly. This one was a 9.0... 1000 times more energy (not necessarily ’stronger’) than a 7.0 (each whole number is 100X stronger than the one below it). So we’re talking about a lot of energy here.

But that’s not the biggest part. The cooling system failed when the electricity got shut down. And the backup generators shut down with the tsunami. After that, things started getting hot and all that was left was to dump water on the darned things to cool them down. The built-up hydrogen exploded and blew the roofs off two of the buildings.

But the explosions aren’t the biggest threat. The biggest threat is the release of radioactive material. That stuff can get carried on the wind and around the world. This isn’t a good scenario. And while it’s tough to say "we have to wait and see", that really is about all we can do. I mean, you trust GE, don’t you? [grin]

Well, that’s about it for this week, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are

saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Final 'Mass Effect 2' Mission Coming!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" "Homefront" Sells 375,000 on 1st Day!
Nintendo Unveils First 3DS Ad!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Final 'Mass Effect 2' Mission Coming March 29

Bioware this week announced that the final mission for "Mass Effect 2," dubbed Arrival, will be available for download on March 29.

"Mass Effect: Arrival" will include three new achievements for the Xbox 360 and the PC, as well as three new trophies for the PlayStation 3. It will be available for 560 Microsoft Points on the Xbox 360, 560 Bioware Points, or about $9 on the PlayStation.

In this mission, Commander Shepard must travel to the edge of the galaxy to rescue an undercover operative who might have information about an upcoming Reaper invasion. "Mass Effect: Arrival" also includes the return of Admiral Hackett, voiced by actor Lance Henriksen of "Alien" and "Terminator" fame.

"All year, we have been extremely honored and humbled by the reception we have received for 'Mass Effect 2' from players around the world, including our post release DLC", Casey Hudson, executive producer of the series, said in a statement. "'Mass Effect: Arrival' is an exciting extension to 'Mass Effect 2' and will show players just how close the Reapers are to returning and completing their deadly harvest."

Bioware has been teasing the release of "Mass Effect: Arrival" all week, releasing screen shots from the mission on its Web site.

Earlier this week, "Mass Effect 2" won the best game awardat the British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA) Video Games Awards. It was lauded by the jury as a "combined achievement of technology, art, design [and] audio - a beautiful complete gaming experience."

The game also won "Game of the Year" at the Swedish "Dataspelsgalan" (Videogame Awards).

In December, BioWare officially unveiled "Mass Effect 3," an update to the franchise that will launch in time for the 2011 holiday season on the Xbox 360, the PlayStation 3, and the PC. The game's trailer, dubbed "Earth," made its debut at the Spike Video Game Awards, and "Mass Effect 3" marks the first time a game in the franchise will launch simultaneously on the three platforms.

"Homefront" Videogame Sells 375,000 on First Day

Video game maker THQ Inc said it sold 375,000 copies of its new military-themed video "Homefront" on the first day of sales in North America.

In comparison, rival Activision Blizzard's "Call of Duty: Black Ops," the top war-themed game on the market, sold 5.6 million copies on its first day in stores in North America and the United Kingdom. THQ's numbers for "Homefront," do not include Europe, where the game launches later this week.

The futuristic game, which is set in 2027, features a North Korean army occupying a bankrupt United States, Japan and Southeast Asia.

The game's content and an associated marketing blitz have touched nerves at a time of heightened tension on the Korean peninsula.

"We are delighted with first day sales for 'Homefront' and are already fulfilling re-orders for the game from multiple retailers," Brian Farrell, THQ's chief executive said in a statement.

THQ shares closed down 1.3 percent on Tuesday at $4.63, after falling as much as 7.7 percent. On Monday, THQ's shares plunged more than 20 percent when it received mixed reviews on influential websites like Metacritic and Game Rankings.

The company's management has made efforts to convince investors that its upcoming games lineup is its strongest ever and the performance of "Homefront," its first release in that slate, is being closely watched by Wall Street.

"Homefront," has been unfairly compared to the "Call of Duty," franchise which has more resources behind it, said Kaufman Brothers analyst Todd Mitchell, adding that THQ's game should be viewed like an indie movie, with lower sales expectations.

"It cost significantly less money than 'Call of Duty' and management said it would break even by selling 2 million copies," Mitchell said.

Mitchell estimates the game will sell 1.3 million units this quarter.

Nintendo Unveils First 3DS Commercial

Nintendo this week unveiled its first commercial for the Nintendo 3DS, set to debut in the U.S. on March 27.

The 30-second spot (below) shows various gamers using the device, the 3D functionality drawing them into the game. "3D games, photos, entertainment, and more. No glasses required. Nintendo 3DS. Take a look inside," a voice says at the end of the commercial.

In New York, Nintendo will host an event on the eve of the 3DS launch, from 9pm on Saturday until 2am on March 27. Nintendo President and COO Reggie Fils-Aime will be at the Union Square Best Buy around 9:45pm to greet fans before being lifted onto a hydraulic stage at 11pm to address the crowd and begin a countdown clock to midnight. Fifteen minutes before Best Buy opens its doors, Nintendo said people will throw old-school 3D glasses into the air to "unshackle themselves" from the need for 3D glasses; the Nintendo 3DS displays 3D images without glasses.

Best Buy will then be open until 2am for those who want to get their hands on the 3DS. The first 300 people in line will receive Nintendo 3DS carrying cases, among other giveaways, Nintendo said.

In addition, the lights on the Empire State Building will be red for the 3DS launch.

The $250 3DS will support 18 games at launch, including the Nintendo-published "Pilotwings Resort," "Steel Diver," and "nintendogs + cats" for $39.99 each. Netflix will also bring its streaming service to the 3DS, the company said at the Game Developers Conference, while Angry Birds is expected on the device later this year.

Nintendo made headlines late last year over a warning that the 3DS might be hazardous to children’s health. At CES, however, Fils-Aime said that the warning that Nintendo put out is common for 3D displays.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

White House Backs Online ’Privacy Bill of Rights’

The White House urged Congress on Wednesday to approve a "consumer privacy bill of rights" to govern the collection and use of personal data on the Internet.

Assistant Commerce Secretary Lawrence Strickling called for the legislation at a hearing on online privacy held by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

"The administration urges Congress to enact a ’consumer privacy bill of rights’ to provide baseline consumer data privacy protections," he said.

Strickling said authority to enforce privacy protections should be given to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), whose chairman, Jon Leibowitz,

has advocated a "Do Not Track" mechanism that would allow Internet users to opt out of having their activities monitored.

"The large-scale collection, analysis, and storage of personal information is becoming more central to the Internet economy," said Strickling, the White House's top communications policy advisor.

"These activities help to make the online economy more efficient and companies more responsive to their customer needs," he said.

"Yet these same practices also give rise to growing unease among consumers, who are unsure about how data about their activities and transactions are collected, used, and stored," Strickling said.

In his opening statement, committee chairman Senator Jay Rockefeller, a Democrat from West Virginia, said it was time for Congress to act.

"There is an online privacy war going on, and without help, consumers will lose," Rockefeller said. "We must act to give Americans the basic online privacy protections they deserve.

"Self-regulation, by and large, has been a failed experiment," he said. "The majority of consumers are uncomfortable being tracked online and it is time the law gave Americans a choice in the matter."

Senator John Kerry, the former Democratic presidential candidate from Massachusetts, said he is already drafting online privacy legislation and the "status quo cannot stand."

"We cannot continue to allow the collectors of people's information to dictate the level of privacy protection Americans get when they engage in commerce," Kerry said.

Senator Claire McCaskill, a Democrat from Missouri, questioned, however, whether privacy controls might have a chilling effect on online advertising and Internet commerce.

"What is the cost going to be in terms of the economic vibrancy of the Internet?" she asked. "How will we draw the line between what kind of behavioral marketing is fair and what kind of behavioral market invades privacy?"

"I just think we have to be very careful about the unintended consequences," McCaskill continued. "I just want to make sure that we don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg here under the very laudable goal of privacy."

"The sky won't fall down on Internet commerce," replied the FTC's Leibowitz, who also addressed the committee. "It's going to continue.

"And indeed, if consumers have more trust in the Internet there's going to be more business on the Internet too," Leibowitz said.

"We think most consumers don't mind being tracked," he added. "We just think they should have the option of opting out of that tracking."

Strickling said the Obama administration had found "a strong level of support among industry" to create the privacy protections and proposed "working with all stakeholders to develop appropriate codes."

"We think we can get to a regime that will greatly improve privacy for consumers and still meet the needs of businesses who want to continue to see the growth of the Internet," he said.

The Center for Democracy & Technology welcomed the Obama administration's call for online privacy legislation.

"This is a historic announcement, marking the first time the White House has called for a baseline consumer privacy bill," CDT president Leslie Harris said.

Internet Privacy and The "Right To Be Forgotten"

When it comes to privacy, the Internet has long been something of a Wild West but that that is starting to change, with regulators in Europe and the United States beginning to pull in the reins.

On both sides of the Atlantic, officials are scrutinizing how companies such as Facebook and Google handle users' personal data, as they draw up plans to protect surfers while ensuring the growth of rapidly expanding social media, search engine and other Web-based businesses.

In the first sign of where Europe may be headed with its privacy regulations, the European Union announced this week that social networking sites and search engines could face court action if they fail to obey new EU data privacy rules.

Under proposals to be fleshed out in the coming months and that will update 16-year-old data-protection laws, the European Commission wants to force companies holding data to allow users to withdraw it from websites, calling it the "right to be forgotten."

Companies would also have to provide more information on what data they have collected from people and why.

"Any company operating in the EU market or any online product that is targeted at EU consumers must comply with EU rules," Viviane Reding, the European commissioner in charge of justice issues, said in a speech this week.

"To enforce EU law, national privacy watchdogs will be endowed with powers to investigate and engage in legal proceedings against non-EU data controllers," she added.

Reding said that EU-based privacy watchdogs should even be given powers to enforce compliance outside Europe, which could include access to U.S.-based servers and other data sources.

While privacy campaigners and Internet users may be pleased to hear what Reding has to say, her words will cause concern in parts of the United States, where many of the biggest and most successful search engines and social media companies are based.

Europe and the United States have traditionally differed on privacy issues, with the EU taking a stronger regulatory approach and U.S. officials more mindful of the need to balance entrepreneurship and business demands with data protection.

But in recent weeks, as U.S. privacy experts have visited Brussels to try to close the gaps between the two regulatory frameworks, officials have emphasized how closely they are working together to come up with a common set of standards.

"I think our baseline understanding of the rules is very similar," said Fiona Alexander of the U.S. Department of Commerce, who was in Brussels this month to meet EU regulators. "The implementation in the past may have been different."

The EU and U.S. already agree on some general concepts, such as the idea that privacy safeguards need to be designed into Web products from the start. They also both want to require Web browsers to offer a "do not track" option to users.

But differences remain on specifics and philosophy.

EU officials are adamant that companies should obtain explicit permission from users before every use of their data - such as through a pop-up consent box - while that is not something U.S. regulators are pushing for, EU officials say.

The right to be forgotten is also a concept that goes against the grain for U.S. regulators, who favor a broader definition of freedom of information.

In a sign of where Europe is going and how complex applying the law could become, Spanish data protection authorities ordered Google in January to remove links to more than 80 news articles mentioning people by name, saying it violated privacy.

The case has been referred to Europe’s highest court.

Some companies, such as Microsoft, support the effort by the European Union and the United States to align their policies, saying it will result in clearer, more uniform rules.

"Companies need solid, clear rules to be able to continue to invest and to be competitive," said John Vassallo, Microsoft’s vice president of EU affairs. "Now, there are too many competing rules."

But even within individual EU countries, privacy rules vary so much that lawyers say it would be almost impossible for a multinational company to be compliant in all 27 EU countries.

That suggests that Reding and her EU regulatory team will have their work cut out if they are to draw up a clear and workable policy in the months ahead, and one that fits well with the rules U.S. regulators are also drawing up.

Clinton Argues for ’Consumption Tax’ on E-Commerce

On the issue of taxes applied to Internet retailers, President Bill Clinton appeared to more fully shift away from the laissez-faire stance he struck while in office, arguing that a "consumption tax" should be placed on e-commerce.

Clinton spoke Wednesday night at the 40th public meeting of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the body that oveersees the Domain Name System (DNS) at the heart of the Internet.

Clinton signed the Internet Freedom Tax Act in 1998, whose chief effect was the de-facto elimination of sales tax for e-tailers who did not have a physical presence in the state in which a purchase was made. Clinton said then that he did so to prevent stifling the emerging ’Net economy, although he did believe in funding state and local governments.

Since then, however, companies like Amazon have used the act’s provisions to undercut local retailers, while cutting ties with affiliates in states that consider those affiliates a physical presence, and thus justification to charge taxes. Amazon recently severed its relationships with affiliates in Illinois, and has threatened to do so in California, Texas, and other states.

Following a speech that placed his administration in the context of the Internet and what it helped achieve, Clinton was asked what role governments should play in Internet governance.

"Here’s what I think," Clinton said. "I think that in general we should keep doing what we’re doing and make appropriate modifications. I do think there’s a big story in the paper today about whether e-commerce ought to include, particularly if it crosses a certain threshold and size, collecting and remitting sales taxes. And all I ask you to think about is this: I fought very hard for this not to happen for an extended period of time so e-commerce could get started and get going.

"But if you want to keep taxes low and if you want countries to keep competitive tax systems, then you have to have some form of consumption tax as a part of your mix," Clinton added. "And it does seem [to] sense e-commerce is doing great and old commerce is doing not so great, as I can tell you because we lost my bookstore in my little hometown in Chappaqua, New York, and my Borders survived next door but [with] about 40 percent of them next door being closed. Do we need to set up a tax system that favors the people that are doing well and burdens the people that are struggling?"

Amazon could not be reached for comment after hours.

Clinton also indicated that cyberspace should be treated no differently than the real world, at least in regards to law enforcement. "Now, the role of government, let me just say, in terms of specific crimes like the porn sites or whatever, my basic position on that is if it’s a crime in the real world, it ought to be treated - it is a crime in cyberspace, you should have the same policy going after it. But you shouldn’t burden cyberspace with things that you readily accept in the real world because it makes you nervous that people have more access to it. That’s my general rule of thumb."

For the majority of his speech, however, Clinton focused on a topic dearer to his heart: globalization, and the effect of the Internet.

As an economic force, the president said, information technology was a driver of the American economy during Clinton’s eight years in office. IT jobs represented 30 percent of the nation’s job growth and 35 percent of our income growth.

"What happened to America before this meltdown is that unlike in my eight years, we did not have any independent source of new employment," Clinton said.

He also referenced a report delivered by Nobel laureate Michael Spence, which looked at the impact of globalization on two classes of jobs in the "tradable" sector, which competed internationally, and the other, which did not.

"One part of the economy is in the so-called tradeable sector. It's subject to international competition. And the other set is not. The people who work for government and healthcare and things that both can't be exported and can't be subject to foreign competition. And they concluded that one of the reasons inequality was increasing quite apart from government policies that increase or discourage it, is that if you're in the tradeable sector and you're in America, you're doing well. You've proved you're competitive and your income is rising, but the size of your cohort is shrinking."

Those jobs that aren't, such as in healthcare, stagnate. "What happens is you're generating a lot more jobs because the people that you serve are growing," Clinton said. "Both growing numbers of kids in the schools, growing numbers of elderly people needing healthcare and other services, but you're not in the tradeable sector, which means your numbers will go up but since your productivity doesn't, there are more people clamoring for static dollars, so the incomes don't rise."

"And that means that as we go forward, we all really need to be thinking about: what is the next decade's source of new jobs? What role does information technology have in it? How will it be different from the kinds of things that happened in the '90s?" Clinton asked.

"If you ask me a question on any subject tonight, tomorrow, next year, if you'd asked me five years ago, my little mind just goes on a one track and it says well will this build up or reduce the forces of positive interdependence? Will it build up or reduce the forces of negative interdependence? If it will build up the positive, I'm for it," Clinton said. "If it won't, I'm not."

Clinton said that his three favorites scientific discoveries of the past year were the revelations that those humans that did not evolve directly from sub-Saharan Africa had a small amount of Neanderthal genes; the discoveries of possibly Earthlike planets in outer space, and research from the Large Hadron Collider and Fermilab that showed that positively-charged sub-atomic particles called muons actually outnumbered negatively charged muons, and the hope for a grand unified theory.

Clinton also highlighted the revolutions in the Middle East, North Africa, plus the disasters in Japan and Haiti as evidence of the social and cultural power of the Internet, as well.

Dancing around the issue of whether Internet governance should remain in partnership with the U.S. government or align itself with a more international standards body, Clinton noted that institutions - government, ICANN, and others - tend to preserve what they currently have, rather than plan for the future.

"You want the Internet to stay forever young, right? Don't you? A hundred years from now you want somebody in some other godforsaken place

where people have been beat down to do what those kids in Cairo did," Clinton said. "That's what you want."

US Regulator Warns of Facebook Pre-IPO Scams

A US financial regulator warned investors on Tuesday to be wary of con artists peddling non-existent shares in social media companies such as Facebook ahead of their going public.

The Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) said the scams involved offering investors' access to private shares in social media companies ahead of their initial public offerings.

"Investors might think they are getting in on the ground floor of innovative social media companies, but instead find that they may have handed over real money for non-existent shares," John Gannon, FINRA senior vice president for investor education, said.

"Any investor who receives an unsolicited offer to invest in a pre-IPO company should walk away," Gannon said in a statement.

FINRA noted that a company is allowed to sell shares in private transactions but said "these investments can be fraught with risk and are typically open to a select group of investors who meet certain income or asset thresholds."

"While most pre-IPO offerings are legitimate, some are frauds in which con artists sell shares they do not actually have," it said. "Recently, FINRA became aware of potentially fraudulent schemes to sell purported shares of Facebook."

FINRA said the US Securities and Exchange Commission had recently reached a settlement with a securities trader accused of bilking more than 50 US and foreign investors out of more than $9.6 million in pre-IPO scams involving purported shares of Google, Facebook and other companies.

Firefox 4 May Be Rushed To Release Next Week

Mozilla is prepping to ship the final version of its new Firefox 4 browser as soon as next week. Competitive pressures from Microsoft's Internet Explorer 9 and Google's steady stream of Chrome updates appear to be driving the push to finish Firefox 4 and avoid losing more browser market share.

Mozilla only launched its Firefox 4 release candidate for Windows, Mac and Linux last week, giving testers little time to evaluate the product, which is available in more than 70 languages. However, Damon Sicore, director of platform engineering, said Firefox 4 RC1 received a very warm welcome and the time had come for Mozilla to make a decision to ship.

Though Mozilla hadn't made a final decision on the March 22 ship date, "as of now, there are no known issues that would stop us from shipping RC1 as final," Sicore wrote in a developer community forum. "If at any

time we discover issues that would block final release, we would issue an RC2 as soon as possible, reset the ship date, and communicate to everyone."

According to Net Applications, Internet Explorer led the global browser market in February with a 56.77 percent share, followed by Firefox (21.74 percent), Google Chrome (10.93 percent), and Apple's Safari (6.36 percent). Though Firefox lost about one percentage point from the previous month, this was due to a change in weighting by the web-metrics provider based on CIA data on Internet users per country.

With the new CIA numbers factored in, Firefox's share slipped in February since many countries in Western Europe and elsewhere overseas where the browser is popular now claim a lower percentage of global Internet users, the web-metrics firm said. By contrast, IE gained due to shifts in countries with a higher percentages of IE users.

Looking at long-term browser trends, IE lost almost eight percent of market share in 2008, most of which went to Firefox. IE also lost about seven percent in 2009, with gains shared between Firefox, Chrome and Safari, noted Net Applications Executive Vice President Vince Vizzaccaro.

Last year, IE lost about five percent market share while Firefox also declined and Chrome and Safari made gains. With respect to Firefox, it seems that Google has been successful in making speed a top consideration for browser selection, Vizzaccaro observed.

"IE and Safari have also made huge strides in browser rendering speed," Vizzaccaro explained. "I believe Firefox has a fairly loyal user base and if [Firefox] 4 can make significant speed improvements while maintaining their other key features such as syncing and extensions, they will keep their user base happy."

Firefox 4's new JagerMonkey JavaScript engine delivers faster start-up times and graphics rendering, while the browser's support for the WebM format will enable HD-quality videos to run online. The new browser release also features WebGL -- an open standard for accelerated 3D graphic rendering that eliminates the need for users to install special plug-ins.

WebGL will make it easier for web developers to create interactive 3D games, vivid graphics, and new visual experiences for Firefox without requiring a special plug-in. WebGL is based on OpenGL ES 2.0, the same 3D API used for Android and iOS development, noted Principal Firefox Engineer Vlad Vukicevic.

"Many resources available for ES 2.0 development translate almost directly to WebGL development," Vukicevic wrote in a blog. "Unlike desktop or mobile OpenGL development, it's very easy to get started with WebGL - some simple HTML and JS content lets you immediately start writing WebGL code."

Microsoft Releases New Internet Explorer 9 Browser

Microsoft has released the latest version of its Internet Explorer Web browsing software free online, hoping to fend off recent challenges by Firefox and Google Chrome.

"IE9 has just released around the world," a booming voice told a cheering crowd at 11:00 pm Monday (0400 GMT Tuesday) in the Austin City Limits Live concert hall where a launch party was being held.

Internet Explorer 9 (IE9) was available for download in 30 languages at beautyoftheweb.com.

"Things are about to change," Microsoft corporate vice president Dean Hachamovitch said just hours earlier at a press conference at the South By Southwest Interactive technology festival here.

"We took a dramatically different tack," he continued. "It’s a really good day for the Web."

IE9 is built to make the most of Microsoft’s latest operating system, Windows 7, as well as graphics processing chips that can power videos, games and graphics.

The long list of partners that have adapted websites to IE9 includes Facebook, Twitter, Pandora, Hulu, and Yahoo!, according to Microsoft.

"We have worked with partners reaching a billion active Internet users," Hachamovitch said. "All of these partners are using IE9 to make a more beautiful Web, starting today."

More than 40 million copies of IE9 have already been downloaded as part of the process leading up to its official release, according to Microsoft.

Microsoft showed off a lean, muscular new Internet Explorer crafted to spotlight slick websites and beat back competition from Firefox and Google.

Microsoft director of web services strategy Ari Bixhorn booted up an Apple MacBook Pro laptop running the latest version of Firefox for a side-by-side comparison.

A laptop powered by Windows and using IE9 smoothly zipped through cascading images illustrating top tunes at a radio station website while the competition appeared to be much slower.

Once a website is reached, the IE9 browser seems to almost vanish to spotlight the content.

"The browser is the stage and the websites are the stars of the show," Hachamovitch told AFP during an earlier demonstration.

The browser is included in Windows software, and the operating system remains at a core of Microsoft’s software empire. The Redmond, Washington-based technology colossus claims more than one billion Windows customers.

IE9 promised to be another hit release for Microsoft, which has had market success with the Windows 7 operating system and the Kinect motion-sensing controller accessory for Xbox 360 video game consoles.

Opera Releases Web Page Debugger

Opera Software has embedded into its Web browser a beta set of tools, collectively called Dragonfly, that can help developers find errors in their complex Web pages, the company announced Monday.

"Dragonflies eat bugs, and that is exactly what we want [Dragonfly] to do for developers around the world," said David Storey, an Opera developer relationship manager, in a statement.

Dragonfly is not the first browser-based debugger. Mozilla, for example, offers Firebug, and Google's Chrome browser also features some built-in element inspection features as well. Dragonfly also offers the ability to debug Web pages on smartphones, televisions and other devices, by hooking them up to the developer's PC.

In open-source development for nearly five years, Dragonfly was designed to help Web page designers grapple with increasingly complex Web pages and Web applications.

"We were coming into an age where JavaScript was becoming popular again, and Ajax was the buzzword on everyone's lips. Creating complex Web applications without such tools made it hard to support Opera on those services," Storey said, in an interview on the Opera site.

The Opera Dragonfly can debug JavaScript code and can be used to inspect DOM (Document Object Modules), CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and HTTP network packets. It includes a console that highlights errors, and a command line.

With the JavaScript debugger, developers can monitor specific variables or isolate the activity of a specific expression. The network inspector can be used to debug a slow-loading Web page, observing resources as they are downloaded.

In addition to JavaScript and associated Ajax technologies, the debugger also covers HTML5 and related next-generation standards such as SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics).

Dragonfly 1.0 can be enabled in the latest version, version 11.1, of the Opera browser.

EMC's Anti-Hacking Division Hacked

The world's biggest maker of data storage computers on Thursday said that its security division has been hacked, and that the intruders compromised a widely used technology for preventing computer break-ins.

The breach is an embarrassment for EMC Corp., also a premier security vendor, and potentially threatens highly sensitive computer systems.

The incident is a rare public acknowledgement by a security company that its internal anti-hacking technologies have been hacked. It is especially troubling because the technology sold by EMC's security division, RSA, plays an important role in making sure unauthorized people aren't allowed to log into heavily guarded networks.

The scope of the attack wasn't immediately known, but the potential

fallout could be widespread. RSA’s customers include the military, governments, various banks and medical facilities and health insurance outfits. EMC, which is based Hopkinton, Mass., itself is an RSA customer.

EMC said in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission that RSA was the victim of what is known as an "advanced persistent threat," industry jargon for a sophisticated computer attack. The term is often associated with corporate espionage, nation-state attacks, or high-level cybercriminal gangs.

EMC didn’t offer clues about the suspected origin of the attack. It said it recently discovered an "extremely sophisticated" attack in progress against its networks and discovered that the infiltrators had made off with confidential data on RSA’s SecurID products. The technology underpins the ubiquitous RSA-branded keychain "dongles" and other products that blanket important computer networks with an additional layer of protection.

The products make it harder for someone to break into a computer even if a password is stolen, for example. The RSA device, working in concert with back-end software, generates an additional password that only the holder of the device would know. But if a criminal can figure out how those additional passwords are generated, the system is at risk.

RSA is one of the best-known names for this type of "two-factor authentication" technology.

RSA declined to comment on what type, or how much, information was stolen.

Richard Stiennon, a security analyst with the IT-Harvest firm, said there would be "tremendous repercussions" if the criminals were able to silently tap into critical systems using the stolen information.

"You’d never have a sign that you’ve been breached," he said.

In its SEC filing, RSA said that it is "confident that the information extracted does not enable a successful direct attack on any of our RSA SecurID customers." However, it warned that "this information could potentially be used to reduce the effectiveness of a current two-factor authentication implementation as part of a broader attack."

"We have no evidence that customer security related to other RSA products has been similarly impacted," said the company’s executive chairman, Art Coviello. "We are also confident that no other EMC products were impacted by this attack. It is important to note that we do not believe that either customer or employee personally identifiable information was compromised as a result of this incident."

The company said it is providing "immediate remediation steps" for customers. It didn’t specify what those are. It outlined some generic security tips that offer clues about how its customers might be targeted with the information stolen from RSA, such as closely monitoring the use of social networking websites by people with access to critical networks and the need to educate employees on the danger of clicking on links or attachments in suspicious e-mails.

EMC said it doesn’t expect the breach to have a meaningful impact on its financial results.

Microsoft, Feds Take Down Major Spam Network

A major spam network has been taken down by federal agents and Microsoft. Raids were launched Wednesday across the U.S. against the Rustock botnet, which used computers hijacked with malicious software to send out billions of e-mails.

The raids are related to Microsoft's civil lawsuit, filed in Seattle federal court last month, against the unnamed operators of the botnet. The company said the spam network impacts its products and reputation, such as adversely affecting users of Windows and Office, adding traffic loads to Hotmail, and exploiting vulnerabilities in Windows. Microsoft also said spammers using Rustock are violating its trademarks with e-mails that purport to be Microsoft lotteries. On Thursday, the lawsuit was unsealed at Microsoft's request.

The raids involved U.S. marshals joining employees from the software giant's digital-crimes unit, who went into hosting services in Kansas City, Mo.; Columbus, Ohio; Scranton, Pa.; Denver; Dallas; Chicago and Seattle.

The raiders brought a copy of the federal order allowing Microsoft to seize computers thought to have been taken over by the spam network, and that were relaying instructions to a million or more computers in the U.S. and elsewhere. Hard drives and computers were seized in the raids at the hosting providers. Much of the equipment had been leased by companies in other countries, according to Microsoft.

The intent was to remove the central command for the spam network, which is reportedly the largest in the world, and it may have worked - at least temporarily. On its company blog, security firm Symantec reported Thursday that the Rustock botnet may have stopped spamming.

Symantec Malware data analyst Mat Nisbet wrote that, on Wednesday, "the botnet known as Rustock ceased sending spam." He added that, over the last year or so, Rustock has been "the dominant source of spam in the world," accounting for as much as 47.5 percent of all spam by the end of last year.

Nisbet wrote that other botnets are increasing their output and could make up the difference even if Rustock doesn't reemerge. But, he noted, as of Friday "there was a noticeable drop in mail volume since Rustock has dropped offline."

A year ago, Microsoft successfully took down the botnet Waledac. On Microsoft's TechNet blog, Senior Attorney Richard Boscovich of the company's digital-crimes unit wrote that the knowledge from that action led to successfully taking down Rustock, which he described as "larger, more notorious and complex."

He noted that Rustock's infrastructure was "much more complicated" that Waledac's, and taking affected servers from the hosting providers was needed to make sure the botnet "could not be quickly shifted to new infrastructure." Boscovich added that Microsoft is working with ISPs and community emergency response teams worldwide to help "affected computer owners clean Rustock malware off their computers."

ICANN Grants .xxx But Delays Opening Domain Gates

The group in charge of Internet addresses on Friday opened the door for websites ending with ".xxx" but delayed deciding whether to open the floodgates for other suffixes.

The non-profit Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) board voted to approve a petition to add .xxx to the list of "generic top level domains," those endings that include .com, .net, and .org.

However, resolutions considered by the board as its annual public meeting ended in San Francisco did not include whether to approve guidelines that would clear the way for essentially any Internet address endings.

"We think we are pretty close to a workable policy," ICANN board chairman Peter Dengate Thrush told AFP prior to the meeting. "It’s all part of a mission to create competition, diversity and choice."

ICANN has spent years crafting a guide for approving applications for any suggested top level domains. Currently, the agency individually endorses domain name petitions.

The process encountered controversy after feedback from a government caucus included asking for veto power to preclude the creation of top level domains such as .gay that might be blocked in some countries.

The concern expressed was that countries blocking entire domains could lead to a balkanization of the Internet.

Thrush dismissed that worry, reasoning that the adult content at issue is on the Internet regardless of whether a website address ends in .gay or one of the existing terms.

"The issue is the content, which is exactly the same," Thrush said. "It doesn’t change if a website becomes .gay."

The ICANN board did approve a petition to operate an .xxx domain. The request had been rejected about five years ago and was reconsidered after an appeal.

Board member Rita Rodin Johnston prefaced her "yes" vote by quoting a US expression "caught between a rock and a hard place."

"I have never felt this so poignantly as with this .xxx decision," Johnston said.

Piracy A "Global Pricing Problem" with Only One Solution

A major new report from a consortium of academic researchers concludes that media piracy can’t be stopped through ’three strikes’ Internet disconnections, Web censorship, more police powers, higher statutory damages, or tougher criminal penalties. That’s because the piracy of movies, music, video games, and software is ’better described as a global

pricing problem.’ And the only way to solve it is by changing the price.

Over the last three years, 35 researchers contributed to the Media Piracy Project, released last week by the Social Science Research Council. Their mission was to examine media piracy in emerging economies, which account for most of the world’s population, and to find out just how and why piracy operates in places like Russia, Mexico, and India.

Their conclusion is not that citizens of such piratical societies are somehow morally deficient or opposed to paying for content. Instead, they write that ’high prices for media goods, low incomes, and cheap digital technologies are the main ingredients of global media piracy. If piracy is ubiquitous in most parts of the world, it is because these conditions are ubiquitous.’

When legitimate CDs, DVDs, and computer software are five to ten times higher (relative to local incomes) than they are in the US and Europe, simply ratcheting up copyright enforcement won’t do enough to fix the problem. In the view of the report’s authors, the only real solution is the creation of local companies that ’actively compete on price and services for local customers’ as they sell movies, music, and more.

Some markets have local firms that compete on price to offer legitimate content (think the US, which has companies like Hulu, Netflix, Apple, and Microsoft that compete to offer legal video content). But the authors conclude that, in most of the world, legitimate copyrighted goods are only distributed by huge multinational corporations whose dominant goals are not to service a large part of local markets but to ’protect the pricing structure in the high-income countries that generate most of their profits.’

This might increase profits globally, but it has led to disaster in many developing economies, where piracy may run north of 90 percent. Given access to cheap digital tools, but charged terrific amounts of money for legitimate versions of content, users choose piracy.

In Russia, for instance, researchers noted that legal versions of the film The Dark Knight went for $15. That price, akin to what a US buyer would pay, might sound reasonable until you realize that Russians make less money in a year than US workers. As a percentage of their wages, that $15 price is actually equivalent to a US consumer dropping $75 on the film. Pirate versions can be had for one-third the price.

Simple crackdowns on pirate behavior won’t work in the absence of pricing and other reforms, say the report’s authors (who also note that even "developed" economies routinely pirate TV shows and movies that are not made legally available to them for days, weeks, or months after they originally appear elsewhere).

Indeed, the authors have seen "little evidence - and indeed few claims - that enforcement efforts to date have had any effect whatsoever on the overall supply of pirated goods. Our work suggests, rather, that piracy has grown dramatically by most measures in the past decade."

The "strong moralization of the debate" makes it difficult to discuss issues beyond enforcement, however, and the authors slam the content companies for lacking any credible "endgame" to their constant requests for more civil and police powers in the War on Piracy.

Joe Karaganis, who writes the report’s opening chapter, "Rethinking

Piracy," concludes his section with an endorsement of the idea that piracy is a 'signal of unmet consumer demand.' Many content companies and trade organizations have started to embrace this view, but turning a ship this large takes years.

In the meantime, says Karaganis:

Our studies raise concerns that it may be a long time before such accommodations to reality reach the international policy arena. Hardline enforcement positions may be futile at stemming the tide of piracy, but the United States bears few of the costs of such efforts, and US companies reap most of the modest benefits. This is a recipe for continued US pressure on developing countries, very possibly long after media business models in the United States and other high-income countries have changed.

Footnote: The study itself uses an interesting "Consumer s Dilemma" license, which charges $8 for the report to residents of high-income countries and offers it free for noncommercial use to everyone else (including Canada, which is not "high income." Who knew?)

AP Stylebook Finally Changes "e-mail" to "email"

The AP Stylebook, the de facto style and usage guide for much of the news media, announced on Friday that the abbreviated term for 'electronic mail' is losing a hyphen, and with it, a relic of a simpler time when Internet technology needed to be explained very carefully.

The move follows the AP Stylebook s decision to change 'Web site' to 'website' last year, at which time we wrote, "[We] hold our collective breath for other possible updates, such as changing 'e-mail' to 'email.'"

Since then the recently much more progressive organization also published a set of 42 guidelines and definitions for social media, though the future of "e-mail" remained very much in flux.

Today s news, fittingly enough, was first announced on the AP Stylebook s Twitter page, where they tweeted: "Language evolves. Today we change AP style from e-mail to email, no hyphen. Our editors will announce it at #ACES2011 today." Look for the change to be in effect immediately in the online version of the stylebook and in the 2011 print version.

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